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Neoformalism: An Approach to Teaching Film Studies in New Zealand Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Noting the lack of subject material available in New Zealand for the teaching of film studies in secondary school, this thesis attempts to describe a framework which is designed to introduce particular concepts and provide a base for different ways of thinking about film. It endeavours to bridge the gap between those texts that do not have enough theory and those that have too much, lacking easy application to the secondary school classroom.

The objective of this study is to reduce the generalisation that cinema is of little cultural value, and to bring the genuine love that individual's have for film, into an educational context. This has been done through the use and adaptation of Kristin Thompson's Neoformalist approach.

The first part of this study discusses the differences between an approach and a method, and the benefits of the neoformalist approach. This includes an investigation of available literature and how applicable it is to the practical teaching of film studies. The second part deals with the academic principles of the Neoformalist approach, the tools of analysis, and foregrounds the fact that film is a constructed medium in which spectators have an active role. The third part involves the breaking down of the academic terms of the Neoformalist approach and the demonstration of how they can be applied in an educational context. It does this by foregrounding film studies within the paradigm of the Classical Narrative, or mainstream, popular film. The final section offers two brief analyses of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and *Once Were Warriors*, because the only way for a student to gain ability to analyse films is through practice in viewing films critically and reading analyses by other critics.

Essentially it is argued that, Neoformalism is merely one approach to teaching film studies and does not preclude any other reasonable approach. It is based on the assumption that one must understand what one is studying (the film) *before* one can go to the next stage and search out wider notions such as ideology, meaning and so on. Therefore it is beneficial for students that a formal analysis precede any cultural or other

form of analysis, under the assumption that certain skills need to be developed before the ideological and cultural are able to be effectively isolated from the formal. Neoformalism does not preclude such concerns, but grounds them in some contextual, concrete base.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Film is unlimited not only in its choice of subject matter but also in the scope of its approach to that material. A film's mood and treatment can range anywhere between the lyric and the epic; in point of view, it can cover the full spectrum from the purely objective to the intensely subjective; in depth, it can focus on the surface realities and the purely sensual, or delve into the intellectual and philosophical. A film can look to the remote past, or probe the distant future; it can make a few seconds seem like hours, or compress a century into minutes. Finally, film can run the gamut of feeling from the most fragile, tender and beautiful to the most brutal, violent, and repulsive.¹

1.1 WHY TEACH FILM ANALYSIS?

Until recently most, if not all, forms of media have been deemed unworthy of academic study because of their image as "mere entertainment" and their low art rating. Traditionally if a media form, such as film was to be studied, it would be done so under the embracing arm of the English Syllabus, where it would only be studied as an adaptation from a novel, with the film itself receiving no credit.

Now with the introduction of Media Studies at University and Secondary school levels, this notion of media forms, such as film and television, being unworthy of study is slowly changing, although not so much in the area of secondary schools. Many parents, eager for their children to have a good career, still ask the question of whether the academic study of media has any point.

¹ Boggs, Joseph, M. *The Art of Watching Films*. (2nd Edition.) California, Mayfield Publishing Company. 1985. Pg..3.

One answer to that question, is that since the explosion of media within the world, and because it surrounds us in every facet of our lives, we need to train people to be able to deal with this ever increasing influx of media. James Monaco² makes the point that the film and electronic media have, over the years, drastically changed the way we perceive the world - and thus ourselves. Yet we all naturally accept the vast amounts of information they convey to us in massive doses without questioning how they tell us what they tell us.

Film can also be studied purely for art's sake - students study art history at school, so why not film? Although this may get us into the great debate about 'high' and 'low' art, it must be noted that contrary to the beliefs of some critics, films do have a simple entertaining effect. Thompson³ suggests that as with physical exercise, the experience of artworks, can, over a period of time, have considerable impact on our lives in general. And because playfully entertaining films can engage our perceptions and emotions as complexly as can films dealing with serious, difficult themes, the debate over high and low art is not really an issue. (Good examples here are films such as *Forrest Gump* and *The Birdcage*, where serious issues are what make the comical situations, and the actual issue may then become upstaged by the comedy.)

One may then ask, if media are so prevalent in our society, wouldn't dealing with media forms such as film, just become common sense?

John Izod⁴ in his book *Reading the Screen: an introduction to film studies*, answers this question with regards to studying film and television. He states that the experience of watching the screen seems to be enjoyed so naturally and readily that we do not think of it as something that has had to be learnt. He goes on to say that no viewer, before watching a film or a television programme, has to go through the long and weary process each of us has had to suffer in, say, learning to read a book. Izod further suggests that where reading a book, at first seems like hard work, watching a film is totally relaxing and seems to come naturally. Izod⁵ uses the example of a child growing up. To a baby, images on the screen mean nothing, but as the child grows up and starts to recognise images and ask

² Monaco, James. *How To Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media*. (4th Edition) New York, Oxford University Press. 1981. p.vii.

³ Ibid., p.8.

⁴ Izod, John. *Reading The Screen: An introduction to film studies*. Essex, Longman York Press. 1984. p.5.

questions about what they are seeing, the reading of the cinematic image becomes naturalised through practice. In other words, the more films a child, or person, watches, the better they get at 'reading', and thus understanding, the cues in a film.

So, if this is the case, what seems to be the point of learning something one already knows, and which appears to be learnt naturally by practising and informal learning? After all, if everyone reads the screen almost without knowing it, why take the matter any further?

Whether we like it or not, film (and television) influence all areas of our lives, and success in public life often relies on learning how to communicate with the media. The way we think about many groups of people, such as the police or people from the medical profession, is also influenced by what we see on the screen - "whether it is in terms of soap opera stereotypes or the startling and un-stereotyped accounts provided by good documentary films".⁶

Another reason to study film, is as Izod⁷ states, because meaning in film is **constructed**, and it can be constructed in many different ways, all of which subtly alter the meaning that is conveyed. Izod goes on to say:

*To learn something of the methods by which a film has been put together is to discover some of the means by which those who made it tried to shape the audience's understanding of it. It is to discover that our responses to what goes on have been organised not only by the events we watch, but to some extent also by the way those events are presented by the screen.*⁸

Film analysis is not meant to dissect a film so much that we kill the joy of watching it. As Boggs puts it: "*analysis means breaking up the whole to discover the nature, proportion, function and inter-relationships of the parts*".⁹ Boggs further states that analysis neither claims nor attempts to explain everything about an art form. Film will always retain its special magic and its mystical qualities. The elusive, flowing stream of images will

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Horrocks, R. and Tremewan, P. *On Film II*. Auckland, Heinemann Publishers. 1980. Pg.4.

⁷ Izod, p.6.

⁸ Ibid.

always escape complete analysis and complete understanding. In fact, no final answers exist about any work of art. A film, like anything else of true aesthetic value, can never be completely captured by analysis.¹⁰

Analysis also has the further advantage of helping us to lock the experience in our minds so that we may savour it longer in our memory. By looking at a film analytically we engage ourselves with it both intellectually and creatively, and thus make it more truly our own.

The ultimate purpose of analysis, and its greatest benefit, is that it opens up new avenues of awareness and new depths of understanding, (and the understanding it brings will deepen our appreciation.) Instead of cancelling out the emotional experience of watching the film, analysis can enhance and enrich that experience, for as we become more perceptive and look more deeply into the film, new levels of emotional experience will emerge.¹¹

1.2 WHAT NEEDS TO BE STUDIED?

*In general, when we go to a film, we know relatively little about the story; by the end we know a lot more, usually the whole story. What happens in between?*¹²

French film critic Christian Metz once said "Film is so difficult to explain because it is so easy to understand" (cited in Image Wise - competence in visual literacy).¹³ What Metz meant by that was that film is only *seemingly* easy to understand. He goes on to say that viewers see certain functions and are so taken in by them and their eyes are so fooled by the apparent obviousness of the action at that they never stop to ask 'Why do we believe that this or that is happening?'

⁹ Boggs, p.6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.9.

¹² Bordwell and Thompson, p.75.

¹³ Van Zyl, John. *Image Wise - competence in visual literacy*. South Africa, Hodder and Stoughton Educational. 1987. Pg. 15.

As suggested above by Metz, many people find film easy to understand, or at least like to think they do. However, there is often more to film than merely meets the eye. Many viewers, for example, take for granted that what they see on the screen is what has actually happened, and that it has happened in the exact sequence with which it was shown. John van Zyl¹⁴ suggests that viewers see certain functions and are so taken in by them and their eyes are so fooled by the apparent obviousness of the action, that they never stop to ask, 'why do we believe that this or that is happening?'. Van Zyl uses the example:

*If one sees a child pick up a stone and throw it at something outside the frame of the picture, and one is shown a window breaking in the next shot, one simply concludes that the stone one saw being thrown broke that specific window.*¹⁵

However, in reality, this may not be the case, as the two shots could have been months apart and kilometres apart, but because they were put together, they apparently made sense.

Another example of this concealed logic, used by van Zyl¹⁶ is one that often occurs in Walt Disney Wildlife films. The viewer sees a prairie rat peering anxiously into the sky, and then in the next shot, sees a hawk circling menacingly. When the rat jumps back into his hole, in the third shot, the viewer generally assumes that it was threatened by the self-same hawk. the truth of the matter, as van Zyl points out, is that the rat was probably filmed in Texas, the hawk in Arkansas six months earlier, but when the shots were juxtaposed, not only does the viewer create a logical connection between the rat and the hawk, they also attribute nervousness and menace to two neutral shots, without being aware of it.

When watching films, many people have learned to enjoy without understanding how and why one enjoys. Van Zyl suggests that when a viewer sits on the edge of their seat in fear during a chase sequence, or when someone catches their breath at some fantastic events in a science fiction film, the viewer seldom asks, or notices, why one's reactions are like that.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Van Zyl goes on to say that in the chase sequence, the editing was probably done in a certain way, with the shots getting shorter and shorter so that tension was increased, and in the science fiction film the special effects were probably generated by computer. Knowing this enables the viewer to talk about films more sensibly and more knowledgeably.

So when discussing why and how we need to study film, one notion needs to be kept in mind - **Deconstruction**. This is the whole premise to teaching film studies, as by deconstructing film the student is able to cut through the obviousness, the things they take for granted, and to see that what they thought was real was merely mediated and constructed. Van Zyl¹⁷ states that the people who make films do their very best to persuade the viewer that what is happening is real. They try to conceal all the ways that the viewer can detect the unreality of film. They conceal the cuts, they make the camera movement unobtrusive, they make the acting realistic (see subchapter on Classical cinema, and invisible editing).

1.3 HOW SHOULD FILM BE STUDIED/TAUGHT?

Film needs theory, like it needs a scratch on the negative. Alan Parker¹⁸

According to Lapsley and Westlake¹⁹, this supposition is not an uncommon one: directors calling on inspiration and imagination, don't need it, and neither do audiences, who have only to watch and respond. Bring in theory, the assumption goes, and you can say goodbye to the magic of the movies.

This, of course, is not what theory, or in the case of this thesis, a good approach, should do. Taking out the enjoyment of watching a film is not, and should not, be the aim of the analyst. Enjoyment is something that should be enhanced by a deeper analysis of any film.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.21.

¹⁸ Cited in Lapsley, R. and Westlake, M. *Film Theory: an introduction*. New York, Manchester University Press. 1988. Pg. vi.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Film also has both educational and entertainment value which is something that students and teachers alike, should be aware of, and need to learn how to distinguish between. The ultimate aim of film analysis should be to critically examine the total value of a given film, and not just its separate components, such as who made it and what generic features it may have.

The underlying assumption of this thesis then, is that there is an art to watching films that most people are not aware of, and that special skills and techniques can sharpen and enhance the film experience.

As suggested by Richard Lacey,²⁰ a film educator should help children 'learn how to learn' these special skills. It should not be the purpose of the teacher to didactically prescribe ways of thinking about films, because ultimately, they will only be teaching their own opinion, as film is such a unique experience for each and every individual.

Lacey²¹ also suggests that audiences see movies in vastly different ways, and no package of discrete concepts or interpretations can encompass all those ways of experiencing. Therefore we cannot, and should not, reduce a film experience to a few neat lessons. The student's emotional investments in an intense film experience - like any form of art - make it especially difficult for anyone to get by with conventional approaches, such as thematic, ideological or auteur based approaches.

For example, we should steer away from the teaching of films using techniques that succeed in other subjects (such as English), because movies are special types of experiences with their own forms, language, and kinds of meaning. "When movies are taught deductively or as if they were literature, the sense of interaction - of art - is lost in translation".²²

Therefore, students need to be taught how to study their perception of a film, rather than to try and evaluate it. As the teacher, evaluation can be avoided by not setting rigid

²⁰ Richard A. Lacey. *Seeing With Feeling: Film In The Classroom*. Philadelphia, W.B. Saunders Company. 1972. p.2.

²¹ Ibid., p.3.

²² Ibid., p.11.

guidelines about what, when, why and how to teach specific films. Instead, "we should explore the individual aesthetic of each film in order to remain flexible and inductive".²³

Geoff Mayer makes the pertinent point:

*Students can only respond actively to a film, according to their skill in reading the cues contained within the film. This is dependent upon the degree in which their viewing skills have been developed, combined of course, with levels of maturity and other individual factors.*²⁴

Mayer goes on to say that students need to be aware of the underlying strategies employed by different types of film. The task for the teacher then, is not to 'explain' a film, nor to assume the role of arbiter of taste, but, as Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky argues, to call attention to it, to provide a flexible approach that is suited to each film whilst simultaneously addressing the wider formal and cultural context.

This thesis, however, is not designed to transform ordinary filmgoers into expert movie critics. It is more to broadly suggest what to look for and how to look for it, thus helping students (and teachers) to become more aware of the complexity of film art.

²³ Ibid., p.15.

²⁴ Mayer, Geoff. Teaching Film Studies Through Shadows On The Wall. in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*. Vol.No.2, 1994, p.62.